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Gerald of Wales: patriotic Welshman or arrogant agent of English imperialism?

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'Champion of Welsh freedom' had affinity with England too

IN A 2004 poll of Wales' greatest heroes, the late 12th century churchman and writer Gerald of Wales ranked 85th.

The eclectic trinity of Aneurin Bevan, Owain Glyndŵr and Tom Jones occupied the top three spots.

While Gerald's place in Wales' popular consciousness cannot compete with such celebrated figures, the fact that he featured on the list at all is telling. Gerald is evidently seen, by some at least, as a hero of Welsh history.

On the face of it this seems perfectly reasonable.

Gerald was born in Pembrokeshire and spent his childhood there. Although his father was Norman, he was, in part at least, descended from Welsh stock and could boast familial links with Rhys ap Gruffudd, warrior-king of South West Wales. He was thus arguably Welsh by blood and Welsh by birth.

Having taken holy orders at a young age Gerald pursued a career within the Welsh church.

In the mid 1170s he was appointed archdeacon of Brecon and later administered the diocese of St David's on behalf of an absent bishop.

He also wrote a number of lively and readable books containing a wealth of information on Welsh life and society in the Middle Ages.

In particular, Gerald's reputation as a Welsh patriot is based on his efforts to have St David's recognised as an archbishopric.

Had he been successful, the Welsh church would have been liberated from the allegiance which, in this period, it owed to the archbishopric of Canterbury in England.

Moreover, during the 12th century, this English ecclesiastical overlordship was matched by political dominance.

Norman lords took chunks of Wales for their own and English kings mounted frequent expeditions against the remaining Welsh rulers.

In this context it is difficult not to see Gerald's championing of the Welsh church in patriotic terms.

The struggle for St David's

Based on the facts outlined above, Gerald does indeed appear to be a Welshman through and through; fighting the religious oppression of the hated saes at a time when they were encroaching further and further into the heartlands of Wales.

This view is supported by the praise that he heaped upon his compatriots.

In his writings he lauded their martial skills and courage in battle, highlighted their generous and hospitable natures, emphasised their intellectual capacities, wit and prowess in debate, and extolled their musical abilities.

Furthermore, he was at pains to emphasise his own Welsh roots in his own autobiography. These certainly seem to be the attitudes of a man who was proud of his Welsh heritage.

The opening sally of the struggle for

RICHARD MARSDEN



St David's occurred in 1176 when the incumbent bishop died.

The cathedral chapter, which theoretically at least had the power to elect the next bishop, chose Gerald as his successor.

However, theory and practice were often a long way apart during the Middle Ages. In reality, kings tended to control the appointment of bishops through the simple expedient of having the biggest stick.

The cathedral chapter therefore sought approval for their decision from Henry II of England.

Unfortunately for Gerald, Henry refused to accept his nomination and installed his own Norman favourite as bishop instead. With his hopes dashed, Gerald retreated into his books.

Evidently the politically-savvy Henry was unwilling to allow a Welsh can-

WHO ARE YOU RICHARD MARSDEN?

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In addition, I currently teach History at Cardiff University and work as a researcher at the University of Glamorgan.

My interest in Gerald comes in part from his penchant for scurrilous gossip and salacious hearsay, but this is perhaps not the stuff that personal heroes are made of.

My own admiration leans towards a more modern character, who fought the good fight against the forces of capitalist oppression on a daily basis – I am of course referring to that working-class hero, citizen Wolfie Smith of the Tooting Popular Front. Power to the people!



didate, who could claim kinship with a leading Welsh king, to be appointed to the country's most prestigious bishopric.

His concern was that this would give the Welsh a standard around which to rally in defiance of English power.

As Gerald himself later put it, "of the three archbishoprics, that of our church is found in the texts of our histories to be third in number, but first in position".

In this way he claimed for St David's a prestige greater even than that of Canterbury.

As this quotation shows, Gerald was committed to establishing St David's as an archbishopric and releasing the Welsh church from its subordination to Canterbury.

That commitment was demonstrated by the fact that he was subsequently offered the bishoprics of Bangor and Llandaf, but turned them down because of his belief in the St David's cause.

His second chance came in 1198 with the death of the bishop whom Henry had appointed to St David's in 1176.

Gerald again had the backing of the cathedral chapter but was this time opposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who feared the loss of power that an independent Welsh church would spell.

Nevertheless, in 1199 the chapter elected Gerald bishop on the understanding that he would petition the pope to make St David's an archbishopric.

Between 1199 and 1203 Gerald did all that he could to attain that goal.

He called upon every ally and used up every favour at his disposal, took no less than three trips to Rome to see the Pope, was put on trial by enemies in England for stirring up Welsh rebellion, and incurred heavy personal debt.

Yet it was to no avail.

Eventually even his Welsh supporters deserted him for fear of English reprisals and in 1203 Gerald was forced to admit defeat.

He was forced to relinquish his claim to St David's, resign as archdeacon of Brecon, and go into embittered retirement. The dream of a sovereign Welsh church was over.

Gerald the Welshman

This story of aspiration and defeat seems like an apt symbol for Wales' wider struggle against England over the past thousand years.

This is certainly the light in which many more recent Welsh writers and historians have seen Gerald.

For example, a biography of Gerald published in 1889 by the Welsh antiquary Henry Owen was called Gerald the Welshman. This title unambiguously presented its subject as Welsh by birth, blood and culture. Within it

Owen referred to Gerald as a "patriotic Welshman" and characterised his efforts regarding St David's as a battle for "the honour of Wales".



n Gerald and Archbishop Baldwin departing from Hereford at the start of

their mission to Wales. Painting by Ivan Lapper PICTURE courtesy of Cadw, Welsh Assembly Government (Crown Copyright)

The English connection

The evidence above does seem to imply that Gerald was a champion of Welsh freedom against English oppression. Furthermore, several eminent historians have appeared over the years as expert witnesses in support of that interpretation.

However, as is often the case with history, appearances can be deceptive. The Gerald that we have seen so far is only part of the story; it is just as easy to view him as an agent of English imperialism.

For starters, he was only one quarter Welsh. The rest of his lineage was unmistakably Norman and he was part of the top echelon of Norman society in

Wales. Moreover, the lands held by his father and numerous Norman relations had been taken from the Welsh by force only a few decades before he was born.

Moreover, his career was intimately associated with the English church.

Between 1174 and 1176 he was employed as a direct representative of Canterbury in Wales.

In 1189, meanwhile, he accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury on a tour of Wales, exhorting Welsh and Normans alike to go on Crusade.

Gerald's relationship with the English church was therefore rather closer than is allowed by the nationalist perspective put forward above.

Gerald also had powerful links with the English monarchy. Despite his previous refusal to appoint Gerald Bishop of St David's, by 1184 Henry II's attitude had mellowed.

In that year the king took Gerald on as a royal clerk, a position that would put him at the heart of English affairs for the next 12 years.

Indeed, it was in that role Gerald served as Henry's envoy to various Welsh kings in the early 1190s.

Even when he retired from court under something of a cloud in 1196, it was to Lincoln that Gerald went rather than his archdeaconry of Brecon or his childhood home of Pembrokeshire.

These do not seem to be the actions

of a man whose very reason for being was the liberation of Wales from foreign oppression.

So Gerald was, for a significant chunk of his life, politically aligned with the English church and the English monarchy. Such connections throw severe doubt on a simplistically nationalistic interpretation of his career.

We also need to remember that Gerald was only human.

While he was undoubtedly gifted, intelligent, resourceful and determined, his writings also suggest that he was vain, self-aggrandising and occasionally self-delusional.

This was a man who wrote his own autobiography anonymously and in the third person, missing no opportunity to extol his own virtues. It has also been suggested that he only returned to the St David's cause at the end of the 12th century after trying and failing to be appointed to a wealthy bishopric in England.

Bearing this in mind, could it be that Gerald's efforts to become leader of an independent Welsh church were, to an extent at least, motivated by personal ambition and an over-inflated ego?

Civilising the Barbarians

Yet Gerald was a churchman and therefore answerable to a higher power than his Welsh blood, the English monarchy, or even his own ambitions. Many of his opinions and actions were ideologically motivated by a religious outlook which mirrored that of church leaders in England.

Gerald was a product of what historians call the "Reform Church". This was an ecclesiastical movement of the 11th and 12th centuries which sought to re-orientate the moral compass of society. Within the church, priestly marriage was a particular source of consternation, while in wider society it was again sex and marriage that formed the focus of the reformers' zeal.

These Reform ideas were already well-established in England, having been introduced a century before with the Norman conquest.

Gerald was introduced to them during his early education in Norman-occupied Pembrokeshire and then Gloucester.

He was further instilled with them when as a young man he studied and later taught in the church schools of Paris, a centre of Reform ideology.

It must have been a shock for him to return to Wales at the start of the 1170s.

Society and church in most of Wales were rather different from the ideals that reformers like Gerald cherished.

In Wales, priests habitually married and had children. In addition, it was common practice for ordinary couples to co-habit before marriage and for cousins to marry one another.

Such practices were anathema to Gerald and he reported them in sensationalist terms in his writings.

Indeed, his works betray a kind of horrified fascination with all things sexual which perhaps stemmed in part from his own priestly celibacy.

At one point, for instance, he stated that "incest is extremely common among the Welsh, both in the lower classes and the better educated people". Elsewhere he claimed that "it was because of their sins, and more particularly the wicked and detestable vice of homosexuality, that the Welsh were punished by God".

Gerald also condemned other aspects of Welsh life, asserting that "it is the habit of the Welsh to steal anything they can lay their hands on and to live on plunder, theft and robbery".

He then highlighted what he saw as their relentless desire to acquire land and possessions, writing that "quarrels and lawsuits result, murders and arson, not to mention frequent fratricides".

Elsewhere he commented on the

lawlessness and political instability of the remaining Welsh kingdoms.

In this way Gerald painted a picture of the Welsh as immoral, irreligious barbarians in need of a civilising influence from England.

In this he was like a 19th century missionary intent on bringing civilisation and salvation to the heathen savages.

Like many of his contemporaries across the border, he believed that it was his duty to bring moral order to Welsh society.

Gerald's religious beliefs made him every inch the Norman churchman.

In addition he was employed for years by the English state and the English church, both of which were intent on maintaining and extending English power in Wales. Taken in conjunction with his Norman parentage, is this really the profile of a Welsh patriot?

In search of Gerald

In truth, Gerald was neither patriot nor imperialist as we understand the terms today. His actions and writings contained elements of both but he was far too complex a figure to fit into such crude pigeon-holes.

That complexity came through clearly in one of his letters to the pope.

In it he wrote: "I am descended from both nations, from the Princes of Wales and from the Barons of the March, who defend the boundaries of the realm against the continual rebellion of the Welsh, and yet I hate injustice by whichever nation it be committed."

As the quotation implied, Gerald was neither fully Welsh nor properly English but had powerful affinities with both.

This is also shown in one of his books, in which he suggested how the English might conquer Wales once and for all.

Yet in the very next chapter he advised the Welsh on how they could best go about resisting that conquest.

It is certainly possible to see Gerald as a hero of Welsh history, fighting the good fight against English tyranny.

He can also be viewed as a tool of that tyranny, contributing to the slow conquest of Wales by its larger neighbour.

However, in reality neither of these labels is particularly applicable, weighed down as they are by the baggage of modern nationalism.

Could it be that in viewing Gerald through the lens of the present we are missing out on what made him special in his own day?

Perhaps instead Wales can today be proud of Gerald for what he was; an accomplished intellectual, a lively and observant writer, a determined adversary, a witness to many of the key events of the period, and very much a product of his own time.

While that may not justify the number one spot in a poll of Welsh heroes, number 85 seems just about right.

